FIXED LENS ENTHUSIAST

Panasonic Lumix DMC-FZ5

SHARP AND STABLE TELEPHOTO SHOOTING FROM A STYLISH CAMERA WITH HIGH FUNCTIONALITY.

Available in black or silver, Panasonic's Lumix DMC-FZ5 sports the same Leica 12x optical zoom lens as its successful predecessor, the DMC-FZ20, but unlike the FZ20, it cannot maintain the f2.8 maximum aperture throughout its full zoom range. With a plastic body that is almost identical to that of the 3-megapixel FZ3, the FZ5 is smaller, roughly 40% lighter, and 20% cheaper than the FZ20. The camera's body is well made and feels comfortable in the hands.

Panasonic has made the FZ5's grip slightly larger and moved the shutter release button forward to make room for the 'Mega O.I.S.' button that sets the three stabilisation modes (continuous, standby and off). The default continuous setting works for both viewing the subject and image capture and can be helpful when composing tele shots. The drain it places on the battery appears to be negligible. Standby can only be used for still shooting and activates the stabiliser when the shutter button is pressed. It offers a higher degree of stabilisation that is particularly useful when the digital zoom is used.

The FZ5'S viewfinder is remarkably good for an EVF and covered the sensor's field of view very accurately. Its colour reproduction was excellent and it was less prone to streaking in backlit conditions than most EVFs we've encountered. Its high eyepoint makes it easy to use when wearing glasses and adjustment of +/-4 diopters is provided, the widest range we've encountered yet. The larger 1.8-inch LCD screen gives the FZ5 an advantage over its predecessor - and some competing models.

Most controls on the FZ5 are straightforward and the mode dial has a special 'Simple' setting that allows it to be used as a point-and-shoot camera. The menu design is, as usual, excellent and very quick to use. However, once you switch to the A, S and M modes, changing camera settings requires use of the Exposure button in conjunction with the four-way controller. This is both clumsy and slow.

Like the FZ3, the FZ5 lacks manual focusing but has a focus button that lets users pre-focus on a subject without using the shutter release. A handy feature for shots of fireworks and anticipated events, the button locks the focus on the selected subject and maintains that setting until the focus button is pressed again.

Three burst modes are supported: high speed, low speed and continuous. The first records four Fine (or seven Standard) JPEG images at 0.3 frames per second, while the others capture at 0.5 fps for the same number of shots (in low speed mode) or to the card's capacity (unlimited mode). In Simple mode the burst speed is fixed at low. The FZ5's movie modes are similar to those on the FZ3: QVGA resolution at 10 or 30fps with sound. Focus, zoom and aperture settings are fixed at the start of each clip and a 25-second clip at 30 fps fills the supplied 16MB memory card, so you need a much larger card to use this function. Video quality was good for the resolution but not quite good enough for TV display.

On the whole, the test camera delivered nicely-exposed pictures with accurate colours and modest saturation levels, although skin tones were rendered slightly warm. Imatest testing showed the lens/sensor combination delivered above average image sharpness and chromatic aberration was negligible. The auto white balance delivered good results with fluorescent lighting but failed to eliminate the orange cast of incandescent lights. However the pre-sets and manual control produced excellent results. Highlight details were lost in bright outdoor conditions but the overall image contrast range was excellent in subdued lighting and image noise was low at all ISO settings in long exposures after dark. The image stabiliser performed well in both modes, allowing candid shots to be taken in indoor conditions without flash. The flash was comparatively weak, requiring ISO 400 sensitivity to adequately illuminate an average-sized room. It also produced poor results for close-ups because the lens tended to block much of its light.

The test camera took approximately three seconds to power up and shut down, which is good for a long zoom camera. We measured an average capture lag of 0.6 seconds when focusing was required, which reduced to 0.1 seconds with pre-focusing. The camera took less than a second to process a high-resolution JPEG file but almost three seconds for a TIFF image, both of which are relatively fast cycle times. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

IMAGE SENSOR:
4.54 x 3.41mm CCD with 5.36 million photosites (5.0 megapixels effective)

LENS:
Leica DC Vario-Elmarit 6-72mm f2.8-f3.3 stabilised zoom (36-423mm in 35mm format)

ZOOM RATIO:
12x optical, up to 4x digital

LENS MULTIPLIER FACTOR: 7.9x

DIMENSIONS (WXHXD):
108 x 68.4 x 84.8mm

WEIGHT: 290g

RRP: $879

QUALITY RATING (OUT OF 10)

Build:	8.0
Ease of use:	8.5
Image quality:	8.5
Value for money:	**8.5**

DISTRIBUTOR:
Panasonic Australia; 132 600;
www.panasonic.com.au